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Coup Is Sudden but No Surprise

By Don Drake

The takeover of the Diem government in Saigon yesterday was sudden but not unexpected. There were many subtle indications that something was about to happen. Tensions between the government and Buddhists had been mounting steadily for months. President Ngo Dinh Diem—who unconfirmed reports from Saigon early today said had committed suicide with his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu—recently called back troops from the Viet Cong fighting to augment palace guards. The United States, which denies any hand in the coup, has been trying to effect a change in the government for months. And probably the most obvious sign was the fact that the speeches of Vietnamese officials recently have been filled with references to how a revolt would hurt the country in general and the Buddhists in particular.

This wasn't the first attack on the palace of the austere, and autocratic president of 12,000,000 persons. Only last February two

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renegade Vietnamese Air Force pilots strafed the palace for 25 minutes. And on Nov. 11, 1960, 700 marines and paratroopers raided the palace but were defeated by loyalist troops. At that time, the rebels could get neither support from the army nor the people. But in recent months, dissatisfaction has been growing—to such an extent that rival army factions united to accomplish a coup.

It was not until recently that most citizens of this country realized the seriousness of the Buddhist struggle. All that most persons knew was that the Diem government hated Communists and that the United States was helping Diem fight the Viet Cong. But on June 11, a 73-year-old Buddhist monk by the name of Thich Quang Duc sat down in the middle of a Saigon street, waited as fellow priests poured five gallons of gasoline over him and then set fire to himself. A veteran observer of the Vietnamese scene, who witnessed the immolation said at the time: "This could be the beginning of the end for Diem's regime."

The Buddhists, who comprise 70 per cent of the country's population, did not accomplish the takeover but their struggle did provide a focal point to unite the people and most important, the army, against the repressive Diem and his brother. The brother and his wife, Madame Nhu, are considered the power behind the throne.

Morale has been low in the army for years but the constant rivalry between generals prevented united action against the government. Many of the officers who were Buddhists felt that Diem, a

Catholic, gave preferential treatment to Catholics. Diem, who once aspired to be a Catholic priest, often made promotions on the basis of politics instead of merit. Many generals thought military strategy was sacrificed for the benefit of political strategy.

The Buddhist conflict with the government reached a climax on May 8 when 9,000 rioted in Hue in a dispute over flying the Buddhist's flag on Buddha's birthday. Troops were called and someone threw a hand grenade into the crowd, killing 12 persons, including women and children. Diem blamed insurgents in the army, which only intensified anti-government feeling in the army. The U.S. blamed Nhu, head of the palace guards and secret police.

This was followed by the immolation of Thich Quang Duc and six other priests and nuns. The U.S. started putting pressure on the government to discontinue its repressive measures. Henry Cabot Lodge was named the new ambassador to Vietnam. He dramatically showed the Diem government just where the U.S. stood in the Buddhist dispute when he granted asylum in the embassy to three monks. This infuriated Diem.

Lodge told Washington that the battle against the Viet Cong could not be won until there was a change in the Diem government—namely the replacement of Nhu. John Richardson, chief of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Saigon was called back to the U.S. Critics in this country complained that the CIA was aiding the Diem government. Diem, in turn, claimed the CIA was trying to overthrow his government. Some minor trade credits and aid was stopped but the U.S. was caught in a dilemma. To cut aid significantly meant the Viet Cong might take over South Vietnam and perhaps all of Southeast Asia. This was how the situation stood yesterday when suddenly the palace was under siege.

The U.S. has pumped more than \$3 billion into the country. More than 16,000 military advisers from the U.S. have been stationed there to help fight the Viet Cong.